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NOTES FOR A PRESENTATION TO THE DEFENSE POLICY BOARD, 14 July 1988

The Soviets criticize themselves these days with disarming candor. The question is: Who gets disarmed, them or us?

Presentation might be entitled "Gorbachev's USSR for the Defense Planner". Given leadtimes and lifetimes of strategies and systems, the defense planner must take a long view.

Soviet Russia going through another tumultuous reform, history goes back to medieval times. Past pattern has been eventual counterreform and reversion to type: A powerful and autocratic system, paranoid/aggressive toward the West, technologically and economically backward in many respects, but still strong enough to threaten others. Not clear what will emerge this time. Skeptics and optimists will argue inconclusively. Meantime, the West must maintain strategic and institutional structures (e.g., TRIAD, bases, NATO), built over nearly two generations, to keep the peace, and, where possible, extract accommodations on real security problems.

Security depends more on strategic and institutional structures, which last, than on accommodations, which may not.

Renewed tendency for those structures to erode. Soviets working hard and skillfully to abet that tendency. Make case seductive for the hopeful West: Only by dismantling the structures of the Cold War can Russia herself be liberated from her autocratic and aggressive legacy.

If we go along, gamble our security on the success of an internal and external liberalization that has no precedent in Russian history. If we refuse, charged with inspiring the counterreform when it comes. We shall try a judicious mixture. No sure formula because building one deal at a time ad hoc is no policy; Western interactions with the Soviets will acquire a momentum and a pattern, defined either by us or by the Soviets.

Who and what is Gorbachev?

Wrong question, but unavoidable. Defense planner concerned with a military-political entity whose leaders can come and go within the lifetime of fighter plane.

Enigmatic mixture of the humane, visionary, and cynical. Khrushchev...

Vision of the future USSR: Leninist with one-party rule, but more law-governed and just, more democratic and at ease with diversity, more reconciled within itself and with the outside world, above all more efficient and productive. What is conviction and what is ploy? Glasnost and perestroika weapons in struggle to build personal power (destalinization for Khrushchev or "socialism in one country" for Stalin).

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Gorbachev is a true (modern) believer (Lenin, Solzhenitsyn) in the ideal of Russian peasant culture: Tranquil but creative collectivism, in which the energies of individualism are creatively channeled -- not by checks and balances or the workings of the market -- but by devotion to the common good. But Gorbachev's book Perestroika is full of it.

Must remember some less attractive facts:

Life-long apparatchik, starting with Komsomol under Stalin. Patronage of Suslov, Andropov, possibly Shelepin.

No record of reformism 1955-85 that anybody is willing to cite, even after April 1985. (Is this really true?) Many of his allies, at least, stuck their necks out earlier (Yakovlev, Burlatsky).

Liberal line, but authoritarian personality.

Whiff of Russian nationalism?

Displays almost smug self-confidence and superiority in dealing with American leaders.

Gorbachev not a man aiming for other than a superpower USSR, strongly competitive with the West.

Moreover, his top political allies are not "new faces", but mainly figures from the the 1950s and early 1960s who lost when Khrushchev fell.

There are many Soviet intellectuals who cherish a truly humane and democratic vision of the USSR and its place in the world. They now have a voice, but no real political power.

Reform and the Power Struggle

Can the USSR be reformed? Don't know, but it is very unlikely to be reformed democratically from an authoritarian base. Reform must come from a very powerful top.

Lot's going on in the USSR, many agendas, ethnic, political... If the intellectual and political turbulence continues long, it will indelibly influence younger generations. Promising long-term trend.

In the short and medium term, most vital is Gorbachev's struggle for power against and over the Nomenklatura and bureaucracy. Brezhnev's sin not just stagnation, but loss of power from the Kremlin to the barons. Gorbachev has to get it back.

Glasnost and "demokratizatsia" are his major weapons. He has to bowl over the apparatus with populist energies; steadily radicalizing the agenda (while avoiding extremism himself) has been his main strategy.

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Now he's seized upon yet another new formula: "all power to the Soviets" and to himself as both party leader and president. At same time he promises to purge and restructure the central and regional party bureaucracies while cutting their power. He's signalled a clear plan for doing this over the next year. And the Party Conference endorsed this in principle!

Why have the apparatchiki let this happen? Don't they see what's in store for them? Has Gorbachev captured their minds? Intimidated them already? Not entirely clear, but probably they believe they have plenty of time to counterattack. And maybe they do. Gorbachev recovered from Yeltsin and Andreyeva; but these episodes showed the fragility of the reformist cause. He has the advantage of a program, the initiative, and the leader's position.

On the economy, he can offer no more than talk and plans in the short run. Rhetorical victories at conferences are helpful, but not enough. Within the next year he must a) consolidate his hold on the Kremlin by removing the Old Guard, neutralizing Ligachev, and putting his own man in charge of the KGB; and b) show classic Kremlin toughness to the nation by cracking down forcefully on some troublemakers, e.g., among the nationalities.

Armenia looks like the place to set the example.

Then he can be what the system requires: A good but fearsome Tsar...and his reforms have some prospect of success.

Conclusion: Although the liberation of Soviet political and intellectual energies is exciting, inspiring, heartening to us and them ...and could have lasting consequences if it lasts...the real game to watch is the struggle for power.

Economic Prospects

Real reforms have yet to begin. Real progress has yet to be scored. The Soviets themselves tell us this. The question of power must be settled first. Then, within a year or two, there must be some improvement in popular consumption or else the political turmoil will allow too much room for resentment to express itself. The leadership knows this.

Can Gorbachev impose reforms from above in the Leninist style if he gets the power? Not clear. In the medium term, he probably can. A more efficient, prosperous, and powerful system. Eventually, redistribution of economic power will tend to challenge the structure of the system. But even with only partial success or a counterreform, the system will be a more effective competitor to us. Only protracted turmoil or social revolution could change that.

In a 30-50 year timeframe, Gorbachev may come to be a genuine hero to the West, i.e., if the USSR becomes a just, humane, and democratic state..

In a 5-10 year timeframe, he will be a more severe challenge.

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Foreign Policy: "New Thinking" for Old Strategies and Objectives

Gorbachev very successful so far in foreign policy. Creates persuasive image of change without much real change as yet.

Energetic foreign affairs bureaucracy and tactics. Much more imaginative propaganda and diplomatic language. Tremendously appealing rhetoric of "common security", "human values", "threat removal". Gorbachev a world-class personality; his people are "salonfaehig". Disarming critique of previous policies and political approach. Implicit repudiation of ideological cannon, e.g., "class warfare."

Avoiding any "shootouts" that could disrupt the new detente is a top priority; main aim of US-Soviet military-to-military contacts.

Is this all style and tactics? Or a new reality struggling to be born? Or perhaps both?

A look at reality "on the ground" shows a lot of continuity in the architecture of Soviet foreign policy: Objectives, priorities, and even inhibitions.

Acceptance as a superpower and a member of the international community of nations.

Access to Western capital and technology, use of detente to facilitate.

Toward the West: the "peace syllogism". Danger of nuclear war requires arms control requires detente requires receptivity to USSR and respect for Soviet interests.

Toward Europe: "Common Home" not too different from Brezhnev's line in late 1960s, early 1970s; but new emphasis.

Lacking so far is fresh (bolder, riskier) approach to German question.

Willingness to let go of East Europe is the key to a genuinely geopolitical approach to neutralizing Europe. Too risky!

Third World: Arms transfers and backing the Leninist formula for seizing and holding power still the main policy lines. No reduction yet of arms flows. No retreat from Leninist clients except in Afghanistan.

New emphasis on regular diplomatic relations with major Third World countries, but this is familiar from the 1970s.

Disposition not to pick up costly new ventures, but no really good test yet. Maybe in the Philippines?

Readiness to push local settlements...but not sacrifice otherwise viable clients.

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Familiar inhibitions: Japan's Northern Islands; relations with Israel; German question. But we may see movement before long.

Do Afghanistan troop pullout and the INF agreement represent fundamental change? Yes and no. Soviets have accepted things we long thought very unlikely. But in both cases we see bold, intelligent response to political and military defeat of earlier Soviet policies now judged stupid.

We have seen major changes in the basic aims of Soviet foreign policy in the past: Rapallo 1922; Popular Front mid-1930s; Hitler-Stalin Pact 1939; Khrushchev's new look 1954-55. Nothing we have seen so far under Gorbachev matches these changes.

Best earliest test of real structural change in Soviet foreign policy may come in Middle East. Does Moscow have the will and skill to move into a new balancing position in Arab-Israel, Iran-Iraq; jeopardizing old client relations for new, and seeming to cooperate more with the US?

For two generations Moscow's aim to muscle self in and US out of periphery of Eurasia. Today more public stress on Moscow in, less on US out. But has the fundamental policy aim changed? Doubtful. Certainly too soon to assume. Unwise to plan that it will change.

Military Strategy, Arms Control, and the Economy: A New Strategic Architecture?

[Yet to be completed. Awaiting completion of DDCI's HASC statement. See attached memo to NICers for "best" and "worst" interpretations/outcomes.]

Conclusions

Unless Gorbachev's USSR goes into a protracted and debilitating internal crisis (which the elite has plenty of power to avert, so far), his era will be one of sharpening political challenge to us.

The cutting edge of the challenge will be his much more enterprising foreign policy against the backdrop of a reforming country.

The most dangerous effect of the challenge will be eroded strategic and political structures for defending against what might come out the other end.

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